DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 391 975 CE 070 986

AUTHOR	Hollenbeck, Kevin
TITLE	In Their Own Words: Student Perspectives on School-to-Work Opportunities. Education Reform and School-to-Work Transition Series.
INSTITUTION	Academy for Educational Development, Washington, DC. National Inst. for Work and Learning.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	96
CONTRACT	RR91172012
NOTE	41p.; For related documents, see ED 381 666-670, ED 384 815, and CE 070 987-988.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research/Technical (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Case Studies; Consortia; Educational Benefits; *Education Work Relationship; High Schools; *High School Students; Program Improvement; *School Attitudes; *Student Attitudes; Student Surveys; *Transitional Programs; *Work Experience Programs
IDENTIFIERS	Focus Groups; *Michigan (Kalamazoo County)

ABSTRACT

Focus group interviews were held with approximately 60 of the several hundred high school students who are participating in school-to-work transition programs offered through the Kalamazoo County (Michigan) Education for Employment (EFE) consortium, The 10 focus groups held involved 5-8 students each and were distributed across program types as follows: 3 school-based programs; 4 worksite-based classroom programs; 1 work force entry; 1 business/industry worksite training; and 1 apprenticeship. The students were quite satisfied with their EFE program and credited it with helping them do the following: learn more effectively; formulate and work toward postsecondary education plans; formulate career interests; acquire employability and personal development skills; and obtain desirable part-time employment. The students also identified problems and challenges in the following areas: scheduling and transportation; educational content of work experiences; lack of challenge in coursework; and inadequate publicity and outreach to students. (Appended are the focus group protocol and list of the Academy for Education Development board of directors.) (MN)

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Education Reform and School-to-Work Transition Series

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In Their Own Words: Student Perspectives On School-to-Work Opportunities

by
Kevin Hollenbeck

Prepared for
National Institute for Work and Learning
Academy for Educational Development

The Academy for Educational Development, founded in 1961, is an independent, nonprofit service organization committed to addressing human development needs in the United States and throughout the world. Under contracts and grants, the Academy operates programs in collaboration with policy leaders; non-governmental and community-based organizations; businesses; governmental agencies; international multilateral and bilateral funders; and schools, colleges, and universities. In partnership with its clients, the Academy seeks to meet today's social, economic, and environmental challenges through education and human resource development; to apply state-of-the-art education, training, research, technology, management, behavioral analysis, and social marketing techniques to solve problems; and to improve knowledge and skills throughout the world as the most effective means for stimulating growth, reducing poverty, and promoting democratic and humanitarian ideals.

This work is part of the Studies of Education Reform program, supported by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Office of Research, under contract No. RR 91172012. The program supports studies and disseminates practical information about implementing and sustaining successful innovations in American education. The opinions in this document do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

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Funds for printing and dissemination of this publication were provided by the Academy for Educational Development.

Printed in the U.S.A.

1996

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the National Institute for Work and Learning for its financial support of this study and Sue Hubbard, in particular, for her support and comments. I would also like to thank a number of individuals affiliated with Kalamazoo County's Education for Employment program for arranging the focus groups with students: Irv Cumming, Assistant Superintendent of Kalamazoo Valley Intermediate School District and Director of EFE; Marcia Watts; Judy Shrimplin; Sandy Standish; Nick Westra; Tammi Mallos; Mary Wiersema; Tom Topham; Duwain Hunt; Richard Delong; and Dave Garrett. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of my colleague, Tim Bartik, who co-conducted a number of the focus groups and helped to organize the material that we had recorded. Claire Vogelsong and Ellen Maloney expertly transcribed several hours of audiotapes and helped to produce this report.

Finally, I would like to thank all of the vibrant, alert, friendly, confident, young people who shared their thoughtful opinions and comments during the focus groups. They represented well this stakeholder group. I would like to be able to name them all and to properly attribute to them their thoughtful responses, but I promised them anonymity; thus, I have changed their names in the text.

Introduction

In May 1994, President Clinton signed the School-to-Work Opportunities Act into law. This legislation is intended to further a trend, some might characterize it as a *movement,* toward the use of work-based learning for young people as they make their transitions from formal secondary schooling into careers. While this act did not initiate the trend toward work-based learning, it did represent a major increase in resources and attention to such programs. As we deploy those resources, we need to assess the strengths and weaknesses of existing school-to-work transition programs to replicate effective strategies and to avoid problematic areas to the extent possible. Full assessment requires consultation with all stakeholders involved in these programs.

Students are a stakeholder group that has traditionally not been consulted widely in educational evaluations and, in particular, has not had a significant voice in the school-to-work arena. This paper is intended to voice the opinions and perspectives of students about school-to-work opportunities. It is based on a case study of programs in Kalamazoo County, Michigan. The Kalamazoo County Education for Employment (EFE) Consortium has offered a number of innovative work-based learning programs over the last few years. This paper is based on focus group discussions with students currently enrolled in EFE programs concerning their experiences in these programs and their opinions about program strengths and weaknesses.

Those who feel that high school students lack maturity and direction or that it is impossible to design instructional programs that can engage and motivate high school students should talk to students participating in innovative school-to-work transition initiatives, such as the EFE programs. As described below, this paper is based on focus groups with approximately 60 high school students enrolled in EFE programs. These students represented the entire spectrum of abilities and interests. Yet all of them were mature and articulate about the benefits they are receiving from their experiences in different types of work-based learning programs.

The students who participated in the focus groups are engaged in a wide variety of work-based opportunities. For example, one spends his first two hours of the day at a veterinarian's office viewing and assisting with animal surgeries. Several are learning the crafts of stage technicians by working next to professionals from national touring companies. A half-dozen of the students are formally registered for apprenticeships in trade and industrial areas and will accumulate hundreds of on-the-job hours and a dozen or more postsecondary credits toward their journey person's card *before* they leave high school. This paper tells their stories and presents these and other students' perspectives on school-to-work transition programs.

The first section of the paper describes the EFE programs, which run the gamut from traditional classes in school settings, to worksite programs that involve formal education and job training experiences, to formal apprenticeships. Section 2 provides details about the process that was followed in conducting the study. Section 3 presents students' perceptions about the meaning of school-to-work transition programs. Section 4 considers the explicit benefits that the students feel they are receiving from participation in the EFE programs. Section 5 explores some of the students' concerns and areas of dissatisfaction. In Section 6, the students reflect upon how their lives would have been different if they had not been able to participate in the EFE programs. Section 7 concludes with a summary and lessons learned.

EFE Programs

EFE programs are offered by a consortium of the nine public school districts in Kalamazoo County, the Kalamazoo Valley Intermediate School District (KVISD), and the Kalamazoo Valley Community College (KVCC). Rogers and Hubbard (1994) present a thorough case study report on the EFE consortium and its programs, which are offered throughout the K-12 and postsecondary systems in the districts comprising KVISD. This section of the paper describes the programs that are available to 11th and 12th graders because this study focused solely on those programs. Note that most of them have course offerings that are fully articulated with KVCC and with Davenport College, allowing students to obtain college credit.

EFE classifies programs as either (1) school-based programs or (2) work-based programs. But this simple dichotomy does not do justice to the wide variety of offerings. The school-based programs comprise 15 occupational clusters—accounting/computing, agriscience, auto body, auto mechanics, business services and technology, child care, commercial design, construction trades, electro-mechanical technology, graphic arts, machine tool, manufacturing cluster, marketing, photography, and welding. Each of the 11 high schools in the county offers courses in one or more of these clusters, and students from any of the high schools may enroll in them. Approximately 15 percent of the students enrolled in these school-based programs come from another high school.

EFE offers four types of work-based programs. The first type, referred to here as **worksite-based classroom programs,** involves formal classwork at worksite settings. EFE has established programs in six occupational areas. In each of these occupational

areas, local businesses, nonprofit organizations, or government agencies have provided classroom space and have worked with EFE on developing curriculum and on-the-job experiences. These programs include a two-year health occupations program at a local hospital, a two-year hospitality program at a hotel, a two-year law enforcement program at a community probation facility, a two-year plastics program at a plastics manufacturer, a two- or three-year theater technician program at a community auditorium facility, and a cosmetology program at two local beauty academies. In all cases, these innovative programs extend beyond classroom instruction to actual experiential learning. As with all EFE course offerings, these programs are open to and attended by students from all 11 high schools in the consortium. Most of the programs are able to accommodate all the students who are interested in enrolling. In one or two, however, space and instructor availability constrain the programs, so that "slots" are allocated across districts.

The second type of work-based program, called workforce entry, or **co-op**, is paid-work experience in a student's occupational area of interest. In all cases, students are enrolled in a school-based program simultaneously with the co-op experience, and the workforce-entry activity is meant to enhance the school-based program. In fall 1994, 160 students from 10 of the 11 high schools in the county were engaged in workforce-entry experiences. The intent of these experiences is to supplement and contextualize the school-based program by providing actual employment in the occupational cluster that is being taught.

The third type of work-based program, called **business/industry worksite training**, is offered to students interested either in (1) occupational areas that do not have sufficient student interest to fill a (school-based) class or (2) occupational areas that are not traditionally taught at the high school level. The business/industry worksite training positions are offered precisely because there are no related courses, so the objectives and content need to be developed. EFE staff work proactively with employers to determine objectives, content, and assessment standards, and develop content guidelines for the students' supervisors to follow. For example, in fall 1994, 85 students engaged in a teacher-externship program to explore teaching as an occupation. Clearly, this is an occupational area that is not traditionally taught in secondary schools, but these externships allowed students to begin to gauge their interest in teaching as a career. An additional 20 students had training in veterinarian assistance, paralegal, aviation, TV production, and a few other occupational areas where there was not enough enrollment to fill a class. Some worksite-training opportunities are paid; some are not.

The final type of work-based program, **apprenticeship,** offers individuals work for pay outside of school for employers who have agreed to provide the students with the experience and postsecondary education requirements of a formal U.S. Department of Labor-approved apprenticeship leading to journey person status. In fall 1994, EFE had nine students in formal apprenticeships.

Description of Study

This paper is based on focus groups that were held in early March 1995 to gather students' perspectives about school-to-work transition programs, in general, and the EFE programs specifically. Between five and eight students participated in each of 10 focus groups. The intent of the focus groups was to gather information from students in both school-based and work-based programs and from several different high schools. The 10 groups were distributed across program types as follows:

- school-based programs — 3 groups
- worksite-based classroom programs — 4 groups
- workforce-entry — 1 group
- business/industry worksite training — 1 group
- apprenticeship — 1 group

A common set of questions guided each of the focus groups. The protocol questions were used as a springboard for a discussion about school-to-work transition, school- and work-based learning, and their impact on student goals and plans. The protocol, provided in Appendix A, covers the following areas:

- educational and career plans
- the means of school-to-work transition for students
- the extent to which their schools encourage and support the EFE programs
- strengths and areas for improvement of the programs

The students were selected, for the most part, by their instructors, who were asked to choose students representative of all the students in the programs across the entire spectrum of ability and achievement. The selection of students did appear to achieve this goal. In two of the focus groups, the students were selected randomly just before the start of the session so these groups were clearly representative of their entire classes. In the other groups, the students' comments and information were convincing

evidence that the students were reasonably representative of all students in the programs. The students were promised anonymity; all of their names have been changed in this paper.

Student Perspectives on School-to-Work Transition Programs

Although the students were not hesitant to express their opinions about problems they had encountered in their EFE programs, it is fair to say that they were quite satisfied with their experiences. They recognized that they were receiving many personal benefits and that they were enjoying opportunities that were simply unavailable to their classmates. The following comment from Mary, a 12th grader who is participating in worksite training at a veterinarian's office, exemplifies the level of overall satisfaction:

> *I've learned so much from this program; there just isn't time to tell you everything. I've learned a lot of things that I didn't know about veterinarian work. I've learned that I don't want to be a technician; I want to go deeper into it. There are just so many things I have learned. I think it is a really worthwhile program. I think it is great. My little sister—I'm getting her into it!*

During the course of the focus groups, students were asked to define explicitly what school-to-work transition programs meant to them and their thoughts about why the EFE consortium offered these programs. The students characterized school-to-work programs as offering a "jump start" for their postsecondary plans and for their careers. They articulated many benefits that would ease their transition from high school into postsecondary training and careers. But in addition, the students recognized that they were learning through instruction that was quite different, and more relevant, than their formal schooling. They liked participating in the "real world," with its adult responsibilities and adult expectations. At the same time, the students realized that they were receiving adequate support. They did not feel as though they were in a "sink or swim" situation, but rather acknowledged that they were still in a structured learning environment.

Joseph, an 11th grader taking a school-based, two-hour (block) marketing class, pointed out the advantages of a school-to-work program in helping make postsecondary education more accessible:

I think these [school-to-work] *programs give you a good head start over a lot of other students, for colleges and stuff. And if they weren't around, you'd be right in the middle of the pack—if not behind it—in the area that you want to go into when you're applying to a college. And you'd get a lot less acceptance in that area had you not had this experience.*

Nancy and Barb, both students in a school-based business services and technology program (Nancy is also a co-op accounting student), had the following exchange concerning workforce preparation:

Nancy: *...you will have more job skills in the area you want to go into and you will be more prepared than someone who didn't take the classes.*

Barb: *I agree with Nancy on that. These classes are just preparing you for the work force so that when you get out there, you're going to be pretty much ahead of other people.*

Rosemary, a co-op student working at a pharmacy, focused on the "real life" relevance of her experience:

...teachers at school don't really prepare you for what's going to happen in the future. They just hand you assignments and say, "do them." ...the people at work pretty much make you face what you're going to be facing for the rest of your life.

Karen, a co-op student in the public relations office of a large manufacturing company, noted that she felt adequately supported:

...they [the co-op supervisors] *just try to ease you into it. I think the difference between having the job for real—I mean I know that you have the job for real—but the difference between co-op and just a regular job is that they advise you along the way.*

The Benefits of School-to-Work Transition Programs

Students identified the following five types of benefits to their participation in EFE programs:

- resulted in more effective learning
- facilitated postsecondary education plans
- helped formulate career interests
- acquired employability and personal development skills
- obtained desirable part-time employment placement

Before we address these benefits individually, it is important to note that many of the students recognized that their instructors were key catalysts in the process of gaining these benefits. The instructors had tailored their instructional styles to emphasize hands-on learning, which the students greatly appreciated. In addition, the instructors, for the most part, had established a strong rapport with their students. The students had the following to say about the law enforcement instructor:

> *I think the success of this class rests with* [the instructor].
>
> *Once he gets us started, then it's us that makes it. But he gives you that extra little push. He makes you want to do it.*

Students in the hospitality program had the following things to say about their instructor:

> *She is telling you about real experiences here. This is real work. You're jumping right into things, and you're not just reading out of a book and doing homework.*
>
> *I was just going to say* [the teacher] *makes the program. She always keeps us involved with something. She's always doing different things or doing things in a different way. So it doesn't ever get boring.*

Students felt that this support and commitment on the part of their instructors was pivotal to attaining the benefits as discussed below.

More Effective Learning

Much recent work in cognitive psychology has highlighted differences in learning styles among individuals. Some students learn best from traditional instruction that

emphasizes reading and lecture; other students require more active roles in the learning process. For the most part, the students in the EFE programs liked the active nature of the school-to-work transition programs.

A school-based manufacturing cluster program student, Allen, noted:

> *I think the class is really good; it's not like a bookwork class. If we need to know something from the book, we go get the book and look at it; but for the whole two hours that we are there, it's pretty much hands-on experience.* [The teacher will] *set up demos and show us how to do things, but from there, it's basically we who try to do it. And if we can't do it, we do it again; and then if we still can't do it, we go ask him for help, pretty much like you would in a real work environment.*

Mary, the worksite training student quoted earlier who is participating in a program at a veterinarian's office, said:

> *I think it is good that they don't give us tests or exams, 'cause it really makes it easier. You're not so worried about, "Oh I gotta learn this now; I don't have time to be messing around." You can take time to learn it, to ask questions, and you're not so nervous about it. I'm not a book person.*

Tom, a 12th grader in a registered skilled machinist apprenticeship, noted that not only was his work of a hands-on nature, but also "real world" production setting required a variety of machines and a variety of products, which could not be replicated in a classroom:

> *At the job, you do more than one piece, too, not just the same thing over and over. You know you're just making one project in machine shop or the class.*

In addition to liking the hands-on nature of the instruction, many of the students felt that they learned more effectively by being treated independently and being able to progress at their own pace. They liked having control—in some cases, they were able to progress more quickly than in conventional classes; in other cases, they were able to take more time.

Sue, a 12th grade student in a school-based business services and technology class, noted the following:

> *...you have to work things out on your own. You know they* [the EFE program instructors] *give you stuff that would happen in a real work situation. And they—my teacher at least—treats it like a job. You know, she's the boss. You're her employee; we work for her.*

Peter, a 12th grade accounting student, also valued this atmosphere:

> *...I like to work independently and do things at my own pace; work on my own; figure things out. But some students, they don't like that that much 'cause they expect everything to come easy. They want everything to be right there and expect to do it and have no problems doing it. And they expect not to have to ask questions.*

Vanessa, a 12th grade student in business services and technology, agreed:

> *The program I'm in—it's a lot of fun, really. There's a lot of hands-on experience; there's no notebook or lecture-type thing....you can work at your own pace and basically everyone's on a different thing. I've just finished working out of the WordPerfect book that we had, and so now I'm starting on desktop publishing.*

Finally, the students in the worksite-based classroom programs felt that being located offsite enhanced their learning. Matt and Adam, students in the worksite-based hospitality program, had the following comments:

> *I don't know how to explain it...in a public school, you've got kids yelling all the time and screaming and stuff. In this class, you don't have that kind of thing.*

> *The* [high school] *building is cinder block and the windows are covered and, I mean, the colors.... Here you go out and you see the glimmering trim, and we don't have posters plastered up on the wall and all that. It's just more of a real place, not a high school.*

Postsecondary Education Plans

Postsecondary education was very much on the minds of many of the students. Each student was asked about educational plans after high school and whether or not the EFE programs had had any influence on those plans. Surprisingly, every student planned on some type of postsecondary activity. Many of the students were planning to attend four-year colleges; others were planning to attend KVCC (the local

community college) for either advanced technical training or transfer programs. The EFE program experiences were helping students with their college planning in four ways:

- narrowing choice of institutions
- identifying major fields of study
- gaining college credits through articulated courses
- earning money that can be used for college

Several students reported that they had engaged in learning activities or had been given information from their instructors or worksite supervisors that helped them narrow the choice of postsecondary institutions. The students were using this information as they made their application decisions. Morris, an 11th grade hospitality student in the worksite-based classroom program, stated:

> *The college that I'm planning on attending is called Johnson and Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island. I found out about the school through the hospitality program. The lady came into class and talked to us about the school and I guess it sounds like a really good place; it's got a 98 percent employment rate for people who go to school there.*

Nathan, a 12th grade student participating in a worksite training soil science position, indicated the following:

> *I applied to Penn State, Michigan State, Northern Michigan, Colorado (at Boulder), Montana State, and Idaho and I got accepted to all of them but I chose Montana State and I'm enrolled in a dual major.*
>
> *I'm majoring in soil science and land reclamation with a minor in photography. I threw that one in; it sounded fun!*

Carrie, a student in the worksite-based health occupations program at a local hospital, noted:

> *And through this program, I researched five colleges that had physical therapy programs. I got to analyze each one, and I chose Grand Valley because it's a six-year program instead of a five-year program. So it is more spread out, and it's not gonna be as stressful. And it's a joint master's degree program.*

Julia, who has a co-op position with a snowmobile dealer and is interested in a career in auto body repair, said:

> *I've started Valley* [Kalamazoo Valley Community College] *already and I plan on taking business there and I hope to major at Ferris* [State University] *in body and collision technology.*

Besides learning about specific institutions, the students pointed out how their school-to-work transition program experiences were helping them to identify what major fields of study they might pursue—and just as importantly, what major fields they will now avoid. For example, Tony, a co-op student in the data processing department of a large manufacturing firm, said:

> *I wasn't quite sure if I wanted to go into computer science or not, but now I'm pretty sure that I want to go into either chemistry or chemical engineering.*

Mark, a student in the theater technician program, stated:

> *...after I get the BFA/MFA, I'll have to find a university that specializes in lighting. I'm still looking for one of those.*

The advantages gained by having narrowed one's field of interest were explicitly brought out by Ellen, an 11th grade student in the worksite-based hospitality program, who made the following comment:

> *I want to mention that my sister is really supportive, too. She went to college for one year not knowing what to do, and she's a nurse now. She feels that if they had more of the EFE programs like health occupations when she was in school that she probably would have known what she wanted to do before she went into college. She thinks it's really good that I already know what I want to do, and I won't waste a year of college.*

Many students commented about the fact that course articulation was allowing them to earn a considerable number of college credits. Most of the EFE programs are articulated with the postsecondary institutions in the area and students have the opportunity to earn several credits. Students in health fields also noted that certification requirements or postsecondary admission requirements called for a certain number of hours of related experience and that they were making progress on these hours.

Carrie, a student in the worksite-based health occupations class, pointed out the latter type of benefit:

> *And I'm being trained as a physical therapy aide, which is really good. I can get hours. I'm getting hours right now for physical therapy just like everybody else. And I get extra points for extra hours through the program. We only need 50, and I am going to graduate with about 240.*

In the theater technician program, Mark noted exactly how many college credits he would have upon graduation from high school:

> *Because of the program, I will have...12 credits, on my college resume. So, I'll have a head start over everyone else. And I'll start out in the late 100s or early 200-level classes.*

A final benefit that students identified was their part-time earnings to use for college expenses. These students were well aware of the financial costs of attending college and realized that they not only were participating in a program that interested them, but also were earning money that they could use toward their education.

Ken, a student in the theater technician program, explained it this way:

> *I think it's a real good idea because for most people it's not easy for them to get to college and to pay for college....Getting back to the subject of college, they* [co-op and apprenticeship programs] *help you out in paying for college.*

Angela, a worksite-based health occupations student, noted the financial benefits of taking a college-level class in high school:

> *And we're also taking college classes so that gets us college credit without us actually paying for it 'cause the program pays for these college classes. So that helps us.*

Formulating Career Plans

Students had much to say about how the school-to-work transition programs helped them in formulating career plans. Three specific types of benefits they noted included getting exposure to all aspects of an industry, identifying specific careers, and developing personal contacts with employers.

Some of the students recognized that the programs they were in were valuable for introducing them to all aspects of the industry. This was particularly true for co-op students, for whom employer supervisors had made an effort to rotate job assignments. For example, Julia, who co-ops at a snowmobile dealership, reported the following:

> *...my first co-op job was a real learning experience. They transferred me to and from every division of the body shop—from the back as a painter's assistant to the body shop to the front office. So I got to learn how the whole system worked...at my new co-op job, I'm learning how to set up the books and how to run them.*

Rosemary, who has a co-op position at a pharmacy, echoed these sentiments, only in a retail setting:

> *I think it's educational and work, basically, because they show us different things about retail and working with customers.*

The second type of career planning assistance—and the one most often mentioned by students—was identification of specific careers. To explore this subject, students were asked about their career aspirations and, in particular, where they saw themselves in 10 years. For some students, the EFE programs confirmed their interest in a particular occupation. Oftentimes, these interests had been held by the students for many years. In other cases, the program experiences altered the students' aspirations because they found out that they did not like a particular occupation as much as they thought they would. Many students professed that they had had virtually no idea about an occupation prior to the EFE program, and now they had found a field that interested them or, at least, had gained considerable knowledge about an occupational cluster.

Terry is a student in two school-based classes—construction trades and auto mechanics—because he had been unsure about which field he preferred. Now, he has chosen:

> *I want to be a mechanic and the class I am taking is preparing me for it because it is going to get me a co-op job down at a transmission place. Before I took the classes, I didn't know which one I wanted to be, an auto mechanic or a construction worker, so I took both....it helped me with that decision.*

Tony is a second-year student in the law enforcement program. He has chosen a career with the state police:

Actually, it grew out of this class 'cause I really didn't know what career I wanted to go into. But then during second semester last year, we had the opportunity to go out with a law enforcement agency and ride along with the officers, and I chose the Michigan State Police Post in Paw Paw. I gained a lot of respect for the state troopers and decided that that was what I wanted my future to be.

Two students in the hospitality program, Matt and Adam, had the following exchange that shows how a program affects individuals differently depending on their interests and aspirations:

Matt: *I want to get into hotel management. This class...showed me I could be in it. I'm doing really well, and I enjoy it! I really enjoy this class.*

Adam: *I think the big thing is I that I found out that hotel management doesn't excite me at all, so it kind of eliminated that from possible careers. The big thing is seeing maybe what I don't want to do.*

Jose, a student in the health occupations class, wants to become a physician. He said:

I'm going into pre-med. I want to become a doctor. I'm sure I'll take more than 10 years, so in 10 years I'll still be in med school or specializing in something. Health Block [the health occupations program] *did kind of help me out....I didn't have a clue what I was going to be going in my sophomore year. Then I was sort of interested in health careers and health block really helped me pick out what I wanted to do.*

Christie, a student in auto body repair, noted:

I'm looking toward auto design, like design the cars of the future — make lots of money and stuff.

Julia, also in auto body repair, but in a co-op position, said:

I think it [the co-op experience] *helps because it lets you see what kind of job you're looking into. You can hear all about your job and how great it might be, but until you actually do it, you don't know whether or not you're going to like it....I think that* [co-op] *helps so that you don't go and get trained for something and get stuck with something that you're never going to like.*

The school-based management program that Marie, a 12th grader, is participating in gave her a career focus:

> *Well, in about 10 years, hopefully, I will be working for some kind of marketing agency or for another small business to determine their target markets, planning, and promotions. And, yeah, that class definitely influenced me toward that career. I hadn't ever thought about that before.*

William, a senior in the theater technician program, had quite specific plans:

> *In about 10 years? I hope to be performing lighting designs for international tours or working at some theater establishment such as Disney World or Cedar Point—working with lighting equipment and light designs.*

Christine's experience in her worksite training position with a veterinarian has broadened her aspirations. Prior to the program, she had wanted to become a veterinary technician, but now she wants to become a vet. She said:

> *I want to go into veterinary medicine, and I hope to become a veterinarian. It has benefited me to be able to do this—to have hands-on experience—because I actually know* [what I want.] *...at first I wanted to be a veterinary technician, but after job shadowing, I felt that I wanted to do more than just the technician work. They are kind of limited in what they can and can't do, and it helped me to decide to go further than vet. tech. and go into veterinary medicine.*

In addition to helping narrow career choices, the EFE programs also helped students make personal contacts with employers. The students recognized that these contacts may be valuable for future employment or recommendations. For example, Liz, who is a health occupations student, related the story of meeting an executive from one of the local hospitals:

> *Last week, a couple of us talked to a bunch of superintendents from schools and one of the vice-presidents of* [hospital name] *was there....he wanted me to call him* [about whether I got into a particular college] *program because he was sure I would get in. So, probably if I asked him, he could give me a recommendation.*

Tom, an apprentice moldmaker, noted the following:

> *It's almost impossible to go into some place and just say, "Well, I was wondering if I*

could be a moldmaker someday and if I could get a job here." They ain't going to hire you if you don't have any experience—kids like us. You have to have a good word from someone that they know pretty good.

Acquired Useful Employability and Personal Development Skills

Students mentioned that they recognized that the school-to-work opportunities in which they were engaged were valuable for acquiring general employability and personal development skills in addition to the benefits of facilitating postsecondary education or career transitions. Students identified teamwork, communication skills, and general computer literacy as competencies that would make them valuable employees.

Sue, a student in a business and technology class, focused on problem-solving and teamwork skills:

> *She'll* [my teacher] *say, "Okay, nobody can ask questions. You just have to take it. You have to figure it out." I mean...if you come to a spot where you're absolutely stuck, that's different. But when you're just asking simple little questions and just keep asking, she'll tell us, "Well, no more questions. Just figure it out. Do what you can on your own." And most of us can handle it pretty good. We know we can go to each other, too...that's important, dealing with your coworkers, teamwork.*

Angela and Kate, who are in the health occupations program, talked about the development of communications skills. They had the following comments:

> ***Angela:*** *I know this class helps a lot with communication...just about dealing with patients and how to react to different things and how you're supposed to act.*

> ***Kate:*** *I wouldn't have as much self-confidence in talking in front of people. I used to be, like, totally terrified and get really nervous. And now it's not that big of a deal....I have to make presentations every month at my preceptor with an article review. And in front of just classes at school, it's a lot easier just to get up and talk.*

Interestingly, some students realized that they may not choose to enter the specific occupations for which they were being trained, but they were gaining valuable skills nevertheless. Vanessa, a 12th grade student in a business services and technology class (BST), talked about entering nursing, but she still felt that she learned valuable skills in computing in her school-based program:

After high school I was planning to go to a four-year college and pursue a...nursing field and the BST class doesn't really go with that occupation, but I'm taking it for the computer experience.

Several students felt that the school-to-work transition programs helped with their personal development and maturity. They attributed the positive developments to several different aspects of the programs—the instructors' styles, encouragement to bear the responsibility of learning on their own, responsibility of working in a business or industry environment, and program content. The evidence that the students cited concerning their personal development included observations from teachers, parents, and friends.

Three law enforcement students—Michelle, Paula, and Tony—had the following exchange in which they noted that their teachers had commented on the students' maturity:

Michelle: *I noticed that I actually get along better with my teachers, with the faculty and staff, now that I am in the law enforcement program. I'm more recognized by them because they see who can handle the responsibility....The teachers respect students who are out in the field more than they would a student that is just there for six hours.*

Paula: *...they do respect this class because a lot of kids that come out of here are more mature, responsible, and everything like that so they know that I am a product of this class.*

Tony: *This class isn't widely known among the teachers at our school, but the ones that do know it can tell the difference in a person who's in this class and one who doesn't take it because we have a sense of self-direction and more respect for them.*

Michelle: *Yeah, exactly! It's like I have a certain teacher who knows a lot about it, and she sees a difference in me. She tells me almost every day.*

Kate, who is a health occupations student, also noted her teacher's reaction to her personal development:

I was talking to her [English teacher] *the other day and she can notice a difference between us and the other students. She says there's a lot higher maturity level among her students that are not only in this program but in other off-site programs. That*

they just...I don't know...that they respect people more, I guess. I don't know how to say it....They're not as high schoolish I guess.

Teachers were not the only persons who noticed the maturation of students, as Bridget, a law enforcement student, noted:

My mom, she's real supportive. She's glad that I'm in here because she sees a difference in me. She likes it a lot. She likes me coming back and talking about the internship and what's going on, and she likes to hear about my future goals.

As a result of skills learned and reinforcement received from instructors and parents, students have higher expectations for themselves and what they can accomplish. Tracy, a theater tech student, talked about how the program has helped her grow:

Without this program, I don't think I would have the guts to do some of the things I have done....If you've accomplished this program, especially if you were in the first five, you knew that you could do anything. ANYTHING. Try and stress me out, you couldn't do it.

Securing Part-Time Employment

A final explicit benefit that a few of the students discussed was the role that EFE instructors or program participation played in securing part-time employment while still in high school. Ellen, a student in the hospitality program, said:

I think it helped me get hired for my position over Christmas. I worked at [a retail store] *in the mall. When I got my interview, I told them that I was in this program and had the experience of working on problem-solving in retail settings and had customer-related experience from job shadowing here. That I think helped me get the job.*

Problems and Challenges

The students were generally pleased with the school-to-work transition programs that they were participating in, but they did bring up some program aspects that they thought could be changed or improved. Most of these concerns reflect that the world

of work differs in significant ways from schooling, and students in work-based programs feel caught in the middle: are they students or are they employees? The specific issues that the students discussed included scheduling and transportation, the educational content of work experiences, the lack of challenge in some school-based programs, and the level of publicity and outreach about school-to-work programs.

Scheduling and Transportation

An issue that several students brought up was scheduling. Simply put, the schools' calendars don't mesh with business establishments' calendars. Schools have scheduled breaks, weather days, examination days, half-days for parent conferences, and so forth. Businesses don't have such interruptions. In some cases, the programs have been explicit about scheduling issues; that is, students have been told when they are expected to be in attendance at their worksites. In many of the work-based experiences, the students and their supervisors work out scheduling on a flexible basis. However, as presented below, some of the students felt that a number of the attendance expectations were inappropriate.

As an example of a scheduling conflict, one student thought it was inappropriate for his worksite supervisor to expect his attendance during exam days or after the end of school (for seniors):

> [We are expected to come during]...*exam days and any day that other students are not in school. Seniors have to come 'til the 15th even though they graduate on the 4th.*

Another student had a scheduling conflict between his (paying) part-time job and his (unpaid) program activity:

> *...if you are assigned at the same time you have to work your second job, you have to work here. And I personally totally disagree with that. Because, granted this is school-to-work and we have class here and it's almost like a job; our outside job is our income that pays for our cars so that we can get here, that pays for our materials so that we can work here. And the idea of having this coming first before anything else is just a little unreasonable.*

Some students placed very high priority on their worksite activity and were concerned about not getting enough time in that activity. They mentioned that school activities—and discipline—conflicted with their jobs. Comments reflecting this priority follow:

> *They* [school teachers and administrators] *think it's a waste of time. They don't understand that when we go to work, that's what we are going to be doing for the rest of our lives. And they tell us, "Do your homework," and they give us tons of it. And when we get home from work—we're not any different from anybody else—we're tired and we want to get home and go to sleep. I don't think they understand that what we are doing is an actual job.*

> *Detention is something that they don't understand. They don't care. Coming in after school can't happen for us. Then you get a day's suspension for missing it. Then you don't go to work. Then your bosses get mad at you. The school staff doesn't care.... They give you your bad points. It's not easy to call your boss and say, "Oh yeah, I got suspended five days from school so I won't be able to work for a week." They don't like that.*

Transportation is an issue for both school-based and work-based programs in the Kalamazoo consortium. The school-based programs are offered at several of the high schools in the county and are offered at multiple times during the day, which results in a large majority of students being able to take the programs at their own high school. However, about 15 percent of students enroll from other schools, requiring that transportation be provided for them. The off-site programs obviously require transportation for all students. The school districts that comprise the consortium have accepted the responsibility for transportation between schools (buses, vans, or mileage reimbursement) and from schools to the off-site formal programs, but not to co-op, worksite training, or apprenticeship sites. However, as might be expected for high school juniors and seniors, by far most of the transportation is done by personal car.

Nevertheless, one student noted the following:

> [A particular program's attendance expectation] *is very unfair to those students, especially to those students that don't drive. If you don't drive and the bus comes and gets you, if there's no school, how are you supposed to come here? If you don't come here because you don't drive, then you get in trouble.*

Another student had experienced some weather-related transportation problems:

> *I have a concern about the snow days. Out where I live, when it snows, it takes forever for the Road Commission to get out to us....There are times when the road conditions are way too bad, but yet we still have to be here.*

Educational Content of Work Experiences

Another issue that several students raised concerned the educational content of the work-based experience. Students had spent most of their lives in formal educational settings where curricula and learning materials (textbooks) have been carefully developed and sequenced. In work settings, employers often do not and cannot control what activities the students will be exposed to. Furthermore, the EFE activities are meant to be hands-on, so there are no textbooks for the students to consult. Consequently, some of the students were struggling with how to assimilate their learning experiences.

All of the EFE programs attempt to integrate work-based and school-based learning, although the extent and success of the integration vary considerably (at least, as represented by the students). The school-based programs, not surprisingly, seemed to rely least on work-based components. A few of these programs involved field trips or speakers from industry. A number of the programs have students who are in co-op experiences, but students generally felt that instructors have not attempted to integrate those experiences into the classroom. All of the worksite-based formal classroom programs involve work experiences. These experiences range from short job-shadowing stints to extensive (paid or unpaid) internships. Students from the different programs presented varied opinions about how successfully these experiences got integrated into the curriculum.

The EFE program carefully tailors the business/industry worksite training opportunities by developing, with employers, a checklist of objectives and activities that students are supposed to achieve. Furthermore, the students are evaluated in these programs. Students in co-op situations are also evaluated; however, far less attention seems to be paid to the actual content of the job. (According to EFE staff, employers are less inclined to tailor a co-op situation when it involves a paid position.) Finally, the formal apprentices have clearly established work and learning criteria that students are working toward.

A student who co-ops at a large grocery store noted:

> *There are people that are in co-op, that all they do is push carts, and they're not learning much. I think they should set us in a business setting where we're actually learning something, be more specific about what we are supposed to learn, and have us do feedback on what we are learning.*

Another student felt that the work-based portion of his program involved almost no learning:

> *...you should definitely get classroom work and hands-on work. We don't always get that. We don't get much classroom work. It's just all hands-on. I think that the work part of the program should go farther than it does. I think that you should have your experiences related to actual learning.*

His classmate agreed:

> *Yeah, I agree too. There should be, not exactly classroom time, but there should be a time where things are explained. I mean, not where you sit down and actually learn it. But there's been a lot of times where a lot of students just come in and they expect you to know how to do something without telling you how to do it, without getting an explanation. So, I really think there should be a learning process.*

The comments from several students in worksite training at veterinary offices indicate the struggles and triumphs they have had in trying to assimilate their work experiences and demonstrate the value of the EFE checklists of objectives.

> *See, that* [the checklist] *is something that my vet tries to follow and that's what makes it really nice because there's things for which she's said, "If I didn't know you were supposed to do this, I would never have told you to go ahead and do this." ...Like dentistry — most vets don't think about letting you do dentistry.*

> *And it's tough for me to learn because I know I pick up an enormous amount of information, but it's kind of hard because you're just seeing it once, and I'm not a completely hands-on person. I have to do it hands-on and also do some reading on it....It's kind of tough because I will be watching something and just see it for the first time and then they'll come back a week later and say, "Well, you've seen this before—go ahead and do it."*

It's kind of tough because you're afraid of messing things up.

...it's really hard for them to do their job and be able to teach us at the same time while they're doing it. They're not thinking about that while they're doing surgeries. When we ask, that's one thing. I always take notes and try and learn from that, but it's not like you're going to be able to go in there and get all of your experience and be able to apply for a job.

And sometimes it would be nice to have someone to teach. I kind of like to be taught sometimes, instead of always me asking questions. If I think I understand something but I don't really, then I don't really know if they don't tell me otherwise.

It's not like a class where you learn, but I've learned more in a week there than I have anywhere else in any of my biology classes. And, I pick up things as I go along, and I'm always asking questions: what's that? or why is that? So I am learning a lot. It's not like where you sit down and take notes, and you have a test later on. In a way, it's nicer because you can learn things in a different way there.

Lack of Challenge in Coursework

A few of the students expressed the concern that some of the school-based courses were not challenging enough, particularly courses that were not self-paced. For example, a student in a business services and technology class said:

...sometimes I feel the advanced course isn't really advanced; that there really isn't that much of a difference. Sometimes I don't feel challenged enough. I'm just bored with this class because I'm doing the same things over again that I was doing the year before.

A couple of marketing students had the following exchange:

...marketing class is actually going too slow for me.

It is moving kind of slow; I wish it would move a little faster. I wish they would be more specific about the people that get in there and have serious people in it instead of goof-offs.

Inadequate Publicity and Outreach to Students

A final concern that many students had was that there was not enough outreach or publicity about the EFE programs in their schools. Most of the students felt that teachers, other than EFE instructors, had very little knowledge about these programs and that it was almost accidental that the students had become involved in them. In their opinions, outreach and publicity were inadequate.

Tim, who is enrolled in an electro-mechanical technology program, related the following:

> *I was lucky enough to know that this class is offered. I had taken a computer class, and the teacher who taught the class told me about this program. Plus my cousin—she told me about it too. So I was lucky enough to know. But if you were taking general classes and you weren't in the computer class, I don't think you'd have any way of learning about it.*

Nancy, who is in a workforce entry position and is enrolled in a marketing class, said:

> *I was never aware of it until late last year and none, not one single one of my teachers ever said anything to me about it. I just learned about it last year from my marketing teacher.*

Tim and Joseph, students in an auto mechanics program and a marketing class, echoed these observations:

> ***Tim:*** *I don't think regular teachers like English or math or science really know a lot about the programs....*
>
> ***Joseph:*** *Well, I think for most of them* [referring to EFE programs], *just the teachers who are doing the programs...are the only ones who really know about them. The other teachers don't. But I think that if they did, they could get more people into them. It would help them out more if they could reach more students.*

The students acknowledged that it was difficult to reach all students with information about the EFE programs. And in particular, it was difficult to reach them at precisely the right time, that is, when the students were making course decisions. Nancy, an 11th grader in a business services and technology program, put it this way:

I think teachers and counselors think that when [EFE staff] *go around with that video that that is enough. With us, we are really busy, and we forget about things really easily. We need to have the information available when we are choosing courses.And we don't really know the opportunities until we talk to people. Like, maybe the students who are in co-op this year could come to classes and talk about it.*

Life Without EFE

The previous sections have shown that students have definite perceptions of the definition of school-to-work transition programs, the benefits of participation in such programs, and some areas of concern. This section concludes the presentation of opinions by providing students' reactions to the "thought experiment" of what their lives would have been like if the EFE school-to-work transition programs did not exist.

Lawrence, a 12th grade student in a commercial arts program, said the following:

I wouldn't know how to draw. I wouldn't know how to go about getting into college or anything. I probably would have had to just look for a job around Kalamazoo and see what I can do. I'd be stuck.

Terry, a 12th grade student in an auto mechanics program, had a similar answer:

Well, without the programs, we wouldn't know if we liked the occupations [that we're training for] *or not. And when we graduate, we wouldn't know where we wanted to go. We'd probably end up working in, like, grocery stores or something.*

Michelle and Tony, seniors in the law enforcement program, had dramatic reactions to this question. They felt that their program participation had literally straightened out their lives, which had been headed in the wrong direction:

Michelle: *I probably wouldn't even be living at home. My mom probably would have gotten rid of me by now because I used to always be in fights and stuff at school and used to always be in trouble. Then I got into this, and it was about two or three weeks after being in this program, I was no longer on a first-name basis with the principal....so I don't even think I would be graduating this year with my class.*

Tony: *I think we all would have been somewhere on the other side of the law if we hadn't discovered this classroom. It gave us, I think, a sense of direction as to where*

to go, as to what to do, as far as the right thing, to make the right kind of life. I mean even if we don't make it into law enforcement, we've got skills; we've got knowledge of our ethics and where we can be if we really apply ourselves.

The health occupations class has given Carrie, who is a senior, a renewed interest in high school. She noted:

Well, I was losing a lot of interest in high school. I just don't like my high school. I like this class a lot more because it's just...what I want to do. High school is just so many general things. It's nothing that you're interested in. But this class provides something that I'm extremely interested in....because I want to learn it; it makes a lot of difference in your grade. My grades probably would have gone down.

Barry's workforce entry (co-op) experience has kept him interested in and attending his high school. He indicated the following:

Well, I'd probably take an extra year of high school to make up for all the school I skipped.

Tim, an 11th grade student in a manufacturing cluster, thought that postsecondary schooling would probably not have been an option without the EFE program. He said:

I'd be kind of in a rut. I'd probably have to take a year or two off before I went to college because my parents aren't the richest people in the world or anything, and I don't think my grades are exactly the best for scholarships. So I'd have to end up working at some full-time job for two years that I maybe didn't like because I didn't know about plastics engineering or mold making, and I'd probably go into something else and change my career like five or eight times.

Jason has wanted to become a motorcycle mechanic for a long time. In his school-based programs and co-op experience, he has learned that he will need to attend a postsecondary program. Without the EFE programs, he wasn't sure he would have even graduated from high school. He gave the following answer to the question of where he would have been without the programs:

I'd probably have left high school and punched a time clock in a factory or something. Without this program and my [co-op] *job, it would be hard for me to just go into college.*

Summary and Conclusions

The school-to-work transition programs in the Kalamazoo County Education for Employment consortium are providing many benefits to many students. Students expressed with great maturity their awareness of these benefits and expressed their commitment to continue the effort required to complete their programs successfully. This section of the paper presents reflections upon the students' comments and draws conclusions that may be of general interest to program administrators and policymakers.

The surface objective of school-to-work programs would seem to be stimulating student interest in particular occupations (or occupational clusters). The comments of the students suggest that the EFE programs achieved this objective, but that these programs bestow far deeper career-related benefits. In some cases, students learned that they did not want to pursue some occupations or jobs that they had originally been interested in. In other cases, students made contacts with employers who they felt would be useful to themselves in the future. In still other cases, students valued the skills that they were learning and realized that these skills would be useful in their future careers, even though they would not enter the specific occupations of the programs that they were enrolled in.

Perhaps the most surprising lesson from the students was the importance that they all placed on postsecondary attendance. Some critics have suggested that parents and students will avoid school-to-work programs because of their college aspirations for the students. The notion that these parents and students hold is that only a strictly academic, college-preparatory curriculum should be pursued. The students in the EFE programs clearly do not hold this notion.

The EFE programs had encouraged some students to plan to attend postsecondary training who were not otherwise headed in that direction. The programs provided students with information that helped them to select specific institutions and to narrow their fields of study. Articulation agreements allowed students to acquire college credits for courses they were taking, and work experiences allowed students to gain hours toward occupational certification. These benefits should clearly ease concerns that school-to-work programs may impede or reduce college attendance.

A cautionary note that the students provided for program administrators and other educators was their concern about the educational content of work experiences. This issue holds both for the content of the experiences and for the instruction that students were receiving. In some instances, students felt that their work-based experiences lacked any educational content—they were "just" low-skilled jobs. And in other

instances, the students felt that they were engaging in useful learning experiences but that they weren't assimilating the knowledge because not enough emphasis was being placed on instruction.

The issue of the educational content of the programs is certainly not unique to the EFE programs (Corson and Silverberg, 1994, who also raise this concern in a review of a number of exemplary youth apprenticeship programs). It is true, of course, that the students may not have recognized that they were learning skills in their work-based activities. Furthermore, it may be the case that EFE is doing a better job of monitoring and developing useful work-based experiences than other programs. Certainly, the checklists given to employers in the worksite training programs seemed to have considerable positive influence. However, it is also clear from the students' comments and descriptions that they and other students were engaged in work-based activities that they perceived to be lacking learning content. This was particularly the case for the co-op situations, but it also held for some of the other work-based programs.

Students articulated many ways that the EFE programs were different from (and, in their opinion, better than) academic courses. However, one set of comments that students made applies clearly to both traditional academic and school-to-work programs. In these comments, the students attributed the benefits that they were receiving from the EFE programs to the instructors of the programs (or supervisors at the worksites). Concerned and caring instructors or supervisors, who related to the students as individuals, evoked significant motivation and commitment from students.

It may be the case that the quality of instructors is even more crucial for worksite-based school-to-work programs than for academic or school-based programs. This is because of the customized nature of the worksite-based programs and because of their settings. The customization implies that the teachers have an essential curriculum development role. Also, off-site teachers need to deal with students in settings with behavioral norms that differ from schools, so the teachers need to establish and monitor appropriate norms. This requires a highly creative and flexible individual who is able to work independently and establish strong expectations and norms. A little charisma also seems to help.

The last observation focuses on the importance of systemic integration of school-to-work programming. Most of the students felt that teachers (outside of EFE) and students, in general, had very little awareness of these programs and their benefits. In many cases, the students themselves felt that they had gotten involved almost by accident or happenstance—someone they knew had participated in the program

previously or a counselor had recommended that they look into the program. The students felt that schools should be providing more information to students more often.

What are students' perspectives about school-to-work transition programs? In Kalamazoo County where several hundred high school juniors and seniors are participating in school- or work-based programs, students clearly and maturely recognize the many benefits that they are receiving for their careers, postsecondary education plans, and personal development. Their positive attitudes are strong evidence that innovative school-to-work transition programs can successfully engage and motivate high school students.

Appendix A
Focus Group Protocol

1. How did you learn about the program that you are in? (Probe: school counselor, teacher, parent, literature, other) Tell me about the process that you went through in deciding to participate in this program. What factors were important in your decision to take this program/course? (Such as teachers, friends, or parents)

2. What are your career plans? What would you like to be doing in 10 years? Did/does your participation in this program have any effect on those plans? (Probe: Did your career plans precede participation in this program?)

3. What are your educational plans for after high school, if any? Did/does your participation in this program have any effect on those plans?

4. EFE programs are sometimes called school-to-work transition programs. What does the term "school-to-work transition" mean to you?

5. How would describe the "school-to-work" system that is available to you in Kalamazoo County?

6. Does your "home" high school support the EFE program? Why do you say that? (Probe: other students, average teacher, counselor)

7. Do businesses in the community support the EFE program? Why do you think

that? What kinds of interactions have you experienced with employers? (Probe: speakers, field trips, internships)

8. Do your parents and other people in the community support EFE? Why? Have they ever visited your class/site or spoken to your instructor?

9. What are the strengths of the EFE program(s)? Where has it worked well for you? Why?

10. What are some areas for improvement? If you could run this program, what would you do differently?

11. If you worked for a business and were responsible for hiring someone, what skills would you look for? That is, what skills do you think are important to have to be productive?

12. What do you think would have happened to you if the EFE program(s) were not around? How would your life have been different without this system?

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This paper was written for the Academy for Educational Development's National Institute for Work and Learning's Study of School-to-Work Transition Education Reform which is part of the Studies of Education Reform program, supported by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Office of Research, contract No. RR 91-172012. The program supports studies and disseminates practical information about implementing and sustaining successful innovations in American education. The opinions in this document do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Education or the Academy for Educational Development, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

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